

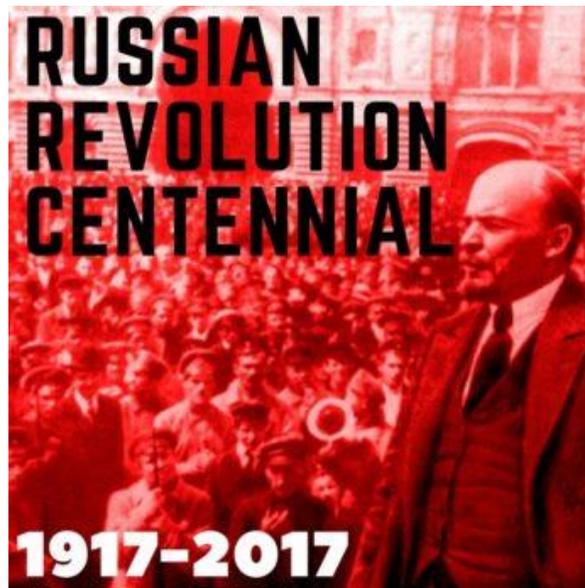
# A Centennial of the Russian Revolution: Its Historical Significance and the Moral Aspect

*1917-2017*

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## I

This year is marked by an important historical milestone – one hundred years have passed since the events which have had a profound influence not only on Russia’s history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also on the historical and political development of much of the world. The anniversary has already spawned a number of philosophical, sociological, political and historical conferences, lectures, public discussions and exhibitions throughout the world. Two major TV series, exploring the events leading up to the revolution, have just hit the screens in Russia this

month, offering an artistic (and quite original) interpretation of the personalities of the two main leaders of the uprising – Lev Trotsky and Vladimir Lenin. Several commemorative performances have already taken place in many countries, although the scope of the reactions has ranged from burning the effigy of Lenin on the central square to laying flowers to his monument. It is thus suitable that we should join the trend here in Kuwait as well, spending some time both recalling the order of the tragic events that were taking place in the former Russian Empire a hundred years ago, and, perhaps, venture at constructing a theoretical framework, which would provide a foundation for the deeper understanding of the historical significance of the Russian Revolutions of 1917.

There is yet another good reason for focusing our attention on the past today, besides being part of the seasonal cultural trend. Revolutions, both successful and unsuccessful, have certainly occurred before 1917 in various parts of the world, they have occurred since that time in multiple countries, and, there is little doubt that the strong appeal of the instantaneous radical political and social change will lead to similar upheavals in the future – and one can only guess which countries would fall prey to it next. Taking a closer look at what has happened in Russia a century ago is more than just paying one's formal dues to the milestone anniversary, but rather an attempt to grasp the deeper logic of the revolutions in general – using the one in question as a paradigmatic study case. Whether there is any consistent and discoverable logic underlying the historical events of that magnitude and significance is a separate question though, but it is my conviction that one should at least make an effort at rational understanding before embracing a

prevalent view that purely irrational and incomprehensible forces determine the flow of human history.<sup>1</sup>

## II

As the matter of fact, the year 1917 in Russia was marked not by one, but by two revolutions – the one taking place in late February, and the second one, occurring in October of the same year. It just happened that the latter date has received much greater prominence throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, simply due to the fact that the Communist party, which has seized power in October of 1917, was in charge of the political and social agenda for the next 70 years. But the events of the so-called February Revolution were, in an important sense, more sweeping and far-reaching than the subsequent coup by the *Bolshevik* party (as the radical wing of the Communist party was then known) later that year. The demolition of the political system of monarchy, which was in place for many centuries, has started in February, and has led to the forced abdication of the last Russian Emperor, Nicolas the Second. The establishing of the first Russian Republican government (the so-called ‘Provisional Government’) was the immediate result of the massive turmoil in the then-capital city of Saint Petersburg. Arguably, the initial social unrest, which led to such dramatic consequences, was provoked, among other things, by the food shortages due to the ongoing World War I, and the relentless propaganda efforts among the soldiers and workers by the ultraliberal wings of the existing political groups, including the ones represented in the Russian Parliament – the *State Duma*.

Whatever were the true driving forces behind the initial revolution, the sudden fall of the Russian monarchy in late February and early March of 1917 was certainly perceived by the

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<sup>1</sup> A. Solzhenitsyn’s last masterpiece, “The Red Wheel,” is an unsurpassed attempt to offer the logical account of the various developments leading up to the revolutionary chaos of 1917, tracing several crucial “knots” which have gradually and jointly contributed to the dramatic climax.

public as the seminal event in all of Russia's history. The centuries-old royal dynasty, which appeared so stable and unshakable only a few months ago, has suddenly caved in to the pressures of the popular demands for freedoms, political reforms, ending of the war and redistribution of wealth. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his important study of the revolutionary turmoil of early 1917, captures the general amazement at the swiftness of the political changes quite well when he exclaims:

Who could have expected, who could have predicted, that the most powerful empire in the world would crumble at such an unthinkable pace? Who could have imagined that a three-hundred years old dynasty, and a five-hundred-years old system of monarchy, would not undertake even the slightest attempt at resistance? There was no such prophet. Not a single revolutionary, not a single enemy of the empire, whether the one planting bombs or the one merely satirizing the government in a newspaper, could have dared to hope for such a flow of events!

Tsar's controversial decision to sign the abdication letter and to give up the throne, instead of summoning the troops and cracking down on the growing civil unrest, was only the first act in the drama that would unfold in the following few months. The cornerstone of the political consciousness of the millions of Russians – the *Tsar* as the God-given head of the state – has crumbled within a few days of the mass demonstrations in Saint Petersburg, leaving a threatening void in a place where “governmental legitimacy” once stood. This void could neither be filled by the newly formed “Provisional Government” nor by the new charismatic leaders such as prime-minister Kerensky or commander-in-chief general Kornilov. It became apparent

that the “right of the stronger” was the only basis for legitimacy in the country after the demolition of monarchy, which, in turn, has greatly emboldened the most radical elements in the political spectrum of the day – the *Bolshevik* party.

The immediate liberalization of the regime after the first revolution, or, what, perhaps, is more properly described as the paralysis of all the governmental functions, has allowed a number of the professional revolutionaries – among them Lev Trotsky and Vladimir Lenin - to return to Russia after more than a decade of exile. Both Trotsky and Lenin were crucial characters in the subsequent developments, although Trotsky’s role would be largely ignored in a standard Soviet version of the events, and for a long time Lenin was depicted as a person who almost singlehandedly planned everything. At any rate, with the return of the radical group of political emigrants to Saint Petersburg, a new revolution was already in the making by the summer of 1917 by the leaders of the Bolsheviks. But, unlike the spontaneous and the somewhat chaotic events of the February Revolution, this time it was supposed to be an organized and a well-planned grasp of power by a single political force with the clear agenda of turning Russia into a first socialist republic, thus realizing the ideal of a communist society, which was first envisioned by Karl Marx decades ago.

Before dawn on October 25<sup>th</sup> (November 7<sup>th</sup>) of 1917 a relatively small, but a well-trained and highly motivated group of armed men (the ‘Red Guards,’ as they called themselves) has taken control of all the critical sites in the capital city, such as the central Telegraph Agency, the State Bank and the train terminals, and, after a short skirmish with the few remaining guards, loyal to the government, has taken over the Winter Palace – the seat of the Provisional Government, which was formed after the fall of the monarchy few months earlier.

Curiously enough, that relatively bloodless seizure of several buildings and bridges on that night went practically unnoticed by most of the inhabitants of the city– in sharp contrast to the massive events in February of the same year, where hundreds of thousands were out on the streets. A prominent American journalist John Reed, who stayed in Russia during that critical period, has left an invaluable eyewitness account of the revolution colorfully entitled “Ten Days that Shook the World.” The book was published less than 2 years after the event itself, and this is how he describes the morning after the Bolsheviks seized power in Saint Petersburg:

I rose very late. It was raw, chill day. In front of the State Bank some soldiers with fixed bayonets were standing at the closed gate. “What side do you belong to?” I asked. “The Government?” “No more Government,” one answered with a grin, “Glory to God!” That was all I could get out of him... The streetcars were running on the Nevsky prospect, men, women and small boys hanging on every projection. Shops were opened, and there seemed even less uneasiness among the street crowds than there had been the day before.<sup>2</sup>

As is well known, the scale of the events of that particular October night was blown out of proportion by the subsequent artistic reenactments of the Revolution in visual art and cinema in the Soviet Union. To underscore its future significance, it became standard to represent the storming of the Winter Palace as a major military operation with tens of thousands of soldiers and sailors involved. But in reality it looked more like a covert special operation and it took several days for the population to realize that they were now living under a new rule altogether, as very few things have changed in their daily routine up to a certain point.

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<sup>2</sup>John Reed, “Ten Days that Shook the World” 1919.

The Provisional Government was thus deposed by the conspirators, and the prime-minister, Kerensky, barely escaped the arrest and eventually went into an exile. The leaders of the Bolshevik party have loudly announced a major victory in a newspaper and leaflets the following morning. Needless to say, the surprisingly successful and quick overthrow of the existing weakened government by the Bolsheviks in October of 1917, which has long lost any popular support, was just the beginning. Taking control of a building was not yet sufficient for taking control over the whole country. The following years witnessed the bloody civil war between the communist forces (the 'Red Army') and their armed opponents with more than two millions of people perishing or being forced to flee their motherland forever. While the Red Army eventually prevailed after 4 years of brutal war, the deep scars of that civil bloodshed are felt among the Russians even today, one hundred years later.

### **III**

The October Communist Revolution has played a decisive role in forming the political environment not only in Russia but in many parts of world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It both inspired the many followers of the Marxist ideology to do the same in their own countries, as, for instance in China, Vietnam, North Korea, Cuba and other Latin American states, and triggered a variety of reactionary countermeasures by the western governments, who represented the opulent ruling class, and, naturally, feared the spreading influence of the communist ideas. To refer to John Reed again, as he was writing his account of the Revolution in 1919, when the fate of the new Soviet Government was still rather precarious and its future was quite uncertain – the civil war was raging throughout much of the country and the foreign powers were trying their best to choke the new socialist state – he has, nonetheless, made the following interesting observation:

It is still fashionable, after a whole year of the Soviet Government, to speak of the Bolshevik insurrection as an "adventure." Adventure it was, and one of the most marvelous mankind ever embarked upon, sweeping into history at the head of the toiling masses and staking everything on their vast and simple desires...No matter what one thinks of Bolshevism, it is undeniable that the Russian Revolution is one of the great events of human history, and the rise of the Bolsheviks a phenomenon of world-wide importance.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the 20<sup>th</sup> century history has shown that John Reed's intuition did not go awry in this case - the overthrow of the Provisional Government by the Bolsheviks in October of 1917 was more than just a minor episode in the political turmoil of that fateful year. The far-reaching consequences of the Communist party coming to power in Russia would have major ramifications in the following decades, stretching way beyond the borders of one country.

But whereas the Communist government that came to power in October of 1917 lasted much longer (up until the early 1990's) than the Provisional Government that came to power as a result of February revolution, from a purely theoretical or, should I say, philosophical point of view, any organized and pre-planned seizure of power, whether by a political party or a paramilitary organization, is much less interesting than the inadvertent, grass-rooted, spontaneous reaction of the people to the perceived injustices or discriminations. A major uprising usually starts as a peaceful protest demonstration but eventually might spiral into something much bigger than could ever be anticipated by its initiators. And the February revolution of 1917 was clearly an instance of that type of uprising. Multiple social and economic factors have gradually been converging together to create a tense revolutionary situation which only needed a single spark to

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<sup>3</sup>John Reed, "Ten Days that Shook the World" (1919).

explode. What has triggered the explosion is not even that important – it was likely a minor conflict between the soldiers and their officers - but the snowballing effect has quickly turned a local insignificant clash into a city-wide, and, eventually, country-wide protests with the revolutionary political agenda.

Interestingly enough, the most perceptive minds could not have foreseen the results of the growing popular discontent in Russia even on the eve of the fatal events. In January of 1917, merely a month and a half before the fall of the Russian monarchy, Vladimir Lenin (of all the people) has infamously ‘predicted’: “We, the old revolutionaries, are unlikely to live long enough to witness the decisive battles of the upcoming proletarian revolution in Russia.” These words were written by a man who has spent many years scrutinizing over the details of the past social upheavals that have ever happened in the world in order to be well-prepared when the time for a new revolution in Europe ripens. In that sense, a social revolution remains akin to an earthquake – it remains notoriously difficult to predict with any kind of exactness despite all the “scientific-sounding” theories and social experiments, and the aftermath of both is equally devastating.

In his recent monograph on the causes of revolutions, for example, an American social scientist Jack Goldstone identifies five conditions which should all come together in order for a revolution to happen.<sup>4</sup> Severe economic problems are certainly one of the main triggering factors of the popular discontent, but they alone are not sufficient. The other conditions include the alienation of the political, cultural and financial elite from the ruling minority, a widely held conviction of the masses that the current regime is thoroughly corrupt and unjust, presence of a shared resistance narrative that is both convincing and realistic, and, finally, a certain degree of

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Goldstone, “Revolution: a Very Short Introduction” (2014).

the international support of the resistance movement, or, at least, the loss of the international support by the current government. When all the five elements are realized to a certain degree, Goldstone argues, it creates a precarious situation of an unstable social equilibrium, which could be shattered any moment by the most trivial cause and lead to a dramatic breakdown of the whole governmental system.

It seems obvious, that Goldstone's theory of the five causes of a revolution is as good as any alternative theory, which might list three, ten, or twenty-five main causes of a social riot. We may compare it with Lenin's famous explanation: "Revolutions happen when the lower classes are unwilling to live in the old manner, and the upper classes are unable to live in the old manner anymore." The latter simplified view is just as reasonable, and just as trivially true, as any other explanatory theory with finer distinctions and many additional variables. As we all know, there is no lack of theories promising to explain *post factum* why a certain revolution has occurred, but an analysis which would allow a reliable prediction of future revolutions still remains and will remain an unreachable goal. Goldstone himself admits at the end of his book that "it is usually impossible to foresee beforehand when all the five conditions would come into place, and so, a revolution will always have an element of surprise." And in this case his conclusion is hardly controversial.

With such a bleak prospect of turning the study of the past into a practical tool for predicting or even changing the future, all that remains for us, perhaps, is to develop and to justify a rational attitude toward the revolution which has already occurred. How should we look at the fact of the Russian revolution now, from the decent distance of a 100 year old period? Is it appropriate to pass an evaluative judgment on the past event and on the people who were directly involved in the event from the privileged position of a future observer? Today, we clearly have an advantage

over an average participant in the Russian revolution in 1917 in that we have an additional century of history to take into account in our analysis. But is it fair to judge the actions of the historical figures based on the evidence that they could not have had access to, or based on the consequences that they could not have possibly anticipated? I personally believe that we should be more than careful before jumping to the final conclusion about the events that have occurred a century ago or passing the final moral verdict on the significant personalities of the revolution of 1917. One obvious reason why such caution is recommended is that whatever judgment we might make today, we are not making it from the point of view *beyond* history, or standing at the temporal edge of all human history altogether – but rather, we are occupying a certain point *in* history, which still continues to unfold. What seems obvious from our relative perspective right now, might be viewed as nonsense by our descendants a mere hundred years from now.

Nonetheless, generally speaking, there are at least four main attitudes towards the Russian Revolution that are current among those who seek to understand the events of the past. First, the Revolution can be seen as a historical necessity, as a predetermined and unavoidable episode in the unending process of the gradual unfolding of world history. This approach, obviously, excludes any kind of moral evaluation of the revolutionary events – from this point of view, it would be no more fitting to pass a moral judgment on the historical process than to express one's moral approval or disapproval with the solar eclipse. Both types of events would belong to the same category of purely natural occurrences. Instead, the Revolution can be viewed as something that simply needs to be understood in its underlying logic and calmly accepted as a brute (even if brutal) fact of human history.

Secondly, a much more personal and involved attitude conceives of the Revolution as a major historical tragedy – an event that theoretically could have been averted, if proper measures

were taken back then, but for some reason was not. People favoring such a disposition toward history usually take great pleasure in contemplating the hypothetical scenarios of what could have been the case, if Tsar Nicolas the Second acted differently, or if the army generals and government officials made the right decisions at certain crucial moments of the uprising, and if many other historical contingencies did not go the way they actually did. From this point of view, the Russian revolution is nothing but an unfortunate accident, a random fit of mass madness – something that should be mourned and lamented by all subsequent generations.

Thirdly, the powerful religious aspect comes into play when any major political disaster or an economic collapse, including the one brought by the revolutions, is seen through the prism of God's intention to discipline his people by means of the periodical social commotions and upheavals. In other words, the adherents of this approach might view revolution of 1917 as nothing less than the divine punishment, a dispensation of God's justice, sent down from above to teach us a certain lesson, i.e., as something to be patiently endured and humbly learned from, lest we provoke the higher powers into sending us another one. Once again, this kind of attitude excludes any direct moral evaluation of the event itself for obvious reasons, as it would be inappropriate to judge and evaluate God's decisions from the limited human perspective.

Finally, the view that was dominant in the Soviet Union for 70 years and is still popular among the supporters of the communist ideology today, presents October revolution as an unprecedented historical achievement – the first attempt to create a classless society with justice and equality for all people. It is only natural, of course, that the winning side would promote the view which underscores the virtues of the revolutionary agenda and the revolutionaries themselves, and presents its opponents in the most negative light possible. From the victor's perspective, the date of the Revolution is something to be celebrated and the leaders of the

revolution are to be elevated to the status of the legendary heroes, whose every action is both exemplary and forever exempt from the ordinary moral constraints. After all, as the view implies, the ends of the great revolution always justify the means.

These four attitudes probably do not exhaust all possible approaches, but they do capture the most common ones. Which one of them a person will assume depends, for the greater part, on the individual preferences and other background religious and political beliefs that one holds dear, rather than on some newly discovered historical facts about the revolution. One's attitude toward the events of 1917 today is usually part of a larger ideological framework that is being accepted as the foundational truth, and is quite resilient to any attempts at refutation by any amount of factual material – one only needs to look at the ongoing heated online debates on this topic to appreciate this claim. The fact that there is still a lack of consensus in our society about the significance of something that has happened 100 year ago testifies to the general truth that the great historical events must be evaluated from the great temporal distance. Apparently, one century is not yet enough to grasp the full meaning of that tumultuous year of the two major revolutions, and we might have to wait for another century to come an agreement about the moral status of those events.

#### IV

Just a few weeks ago, on November 7<sup>th</sup>, in the Russian city of Aleksin in Tula region (about 100 km from Moscow) the so-called 'time-capsule' hidden under a monument was unsealed. It contained a letter, which was written by the Soviet youth organization members, called the *Komsomol*, back in 1967 - the year when 50 years of the October Revolution was widely celebrated in the Soviet Union. According to the instructions, the capsule containing the letter was supposed to be unearthed in November of 2017, the day of the centennial anniversary -

and so it was. It is quite fascinating, to say the least, to read such documents today. The letter itself shows unadulterated enthusiasm when listing the achievements of the Soviet system since 1917, it expresses one's pride in various local accomplishments, which are all carefully mentioned on several pages, and, above all, it breathes with the passionate conviction – the conviction that the events of 1917 have opened up a new era of a Communist society in the history of the country, and that this era will surely continue to flourish in 2017 as well. Allow me to translate just the few lines from last paragraphs of this letter:

“Comrades! As we are moving toward the bright future of Communism, we are absolutely convinced that on that day of the one hundredth anniversary of the Soviet rule, you, our grateful descendants, are now standing near the monument of Lenin and bowing down to the sacrifices made by your predecessors, who gave up their lives for the ideals of the Revolution, and for freedom and independence of our Motherland... On this great day we pass on our torch to you, comrades, and sincerely believe that you will keep going with it from one accomplishment to another – thus amplifying the legendary virtues of your fathers and grandfathers. Long live the Communism!”

However idealistic those hopes might look to us today, one cannot fail to admire the sincerity of the authors of this letter, and many more of this type that have been planted throughout the country 50 years ago and have recently been unearthed. It is hard to think of any current political ideology that would inspire our present generation to write a letter to the descendants with the hope that they would realize some long term social project that we are now working on. The long term global goals seem to have evaporated nowadays from our social space completely. But the ideal of Communism, which seemed tangibly real in Russia after the

October revolution of 1917, was certainly such a unique long-term project that gave deeper meaning and hope to the toils, deprivations and sufferings of the millions of people – if not within their own lives spans, but within the life spans of their children and grandchildren the ideal of an egalitarian society with justice and affluence for all would nonetheless be realized. On occasion, one cannot help but envy people with clear and strong convictions – the phenomenon that apparently becomes quite rare in our times.

But, perhaps, the worst thing we could do today is to sarcastically dismiss these expectations, smiling condescendingly on the naïve outlook of our forefathers. What might appear as a great delusion to the generation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, was more than real to millions of people just several decades ago, and it would be quite presumptuous from our side to write it off as ‘false ideology’ simply because it fails to fit well with the values and beliefs that we currently hold as obvious. Let us not forget that for so many people throughout the world the truth of Communism seemed no less obvious than some well-established scientific fact, and the incentive for action that this belief supplied – whether it was for some large-scale industrial accomplishment in times of peace or for innumerable military sacrifices by Russian soldiers during the World War II - was certainly more effective than any greed-driven, selfish motivation that dominates the modern society.

It is indeed misleading to apply attributes like ‘true’ or ‘false’ to a historical era, and the 70-year-long period of the Soviet rule in Russia, which commenced with the October Revolution, should not be evaluated in terms of some factual truth or falsity of its basic theoretical assumptions either. It is part of our historical timeline that has influenced our present, and, whether we like it or not, will continue to influence our future for many years to come. It is now obvious that judging from its overall significance, the revolution of 1917 stands in the same

row with other pivotal events in the Russian history – the adoption of Orthodox Christianity by St. Vladimir in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the creation of the centralized Moscow-based kingdom by the medieval Russian princes in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the radical reforms of Peter the Great in the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the Great Patriotic War in the early 1940's. In either of these cases, it is futile to speculate about the alternative historical scenarios, as if history was made by a bunch of failing students, whose silly mistakes could easily have been corrected by us, the smart moderns. A more sensible approach, I suppose, would seek recognizable patterns in the events of the past so as to draw the only conclusion about history that appears to be uncontroversially true – history always repeats itself as humans are inherently unable to learn from its lessons.